

## Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918

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**ABSTRACT** By silencing the knowledge of our past, it will not disappear; it transforms into a hum. The hum, as a fluid object of silence can be mournful, can represent absence. The hum that we are neglecting connects with our feelings, registering as cyclic vibrations in contact with parts of the body. The vibrato of the hum speaks of unspoken relations that, according to Tina Campt, unifies quietness with sound, surrounded by affect within a register of meaningfulness. If we don't dare to remember, some images will enunciate—and speak to—the affective register. With the sonic integration of *Radio Influenza*, artist Jordan Baseman's computerized voices narrate stories from 1918 through newspaper fragments. The audible tracks add another register to the vibrations, complicating Paul Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration," where the "lower frequency" is purposefully over(p)layed mainly with a different set of forgotten histories suppressed from the war narrative. Hence, the sound is felt from an audible and visual register, enacted at the level of the quotidian narratives of twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories. If we listen to these quiet photos, to these muffled stories, can we acknowledge that just as sonic vibrations, pandemics tend to come in waves as well? In the end, the 1918 spring influenza outbreak was followed by three waves: the fall of 1918, spring of 1919, and winter of 1919. These waves of history, sound, and pandemics, can push us to resist the neglectfulness and acknowledge what we have unlearned from the cycles of quotidian instances, time and time again.

**KEYWORDS** sound, pandemic, influenza, frequency, cycles, waves, hum

### Section 1: "A temporary failure of memory"<sup>1</sup>

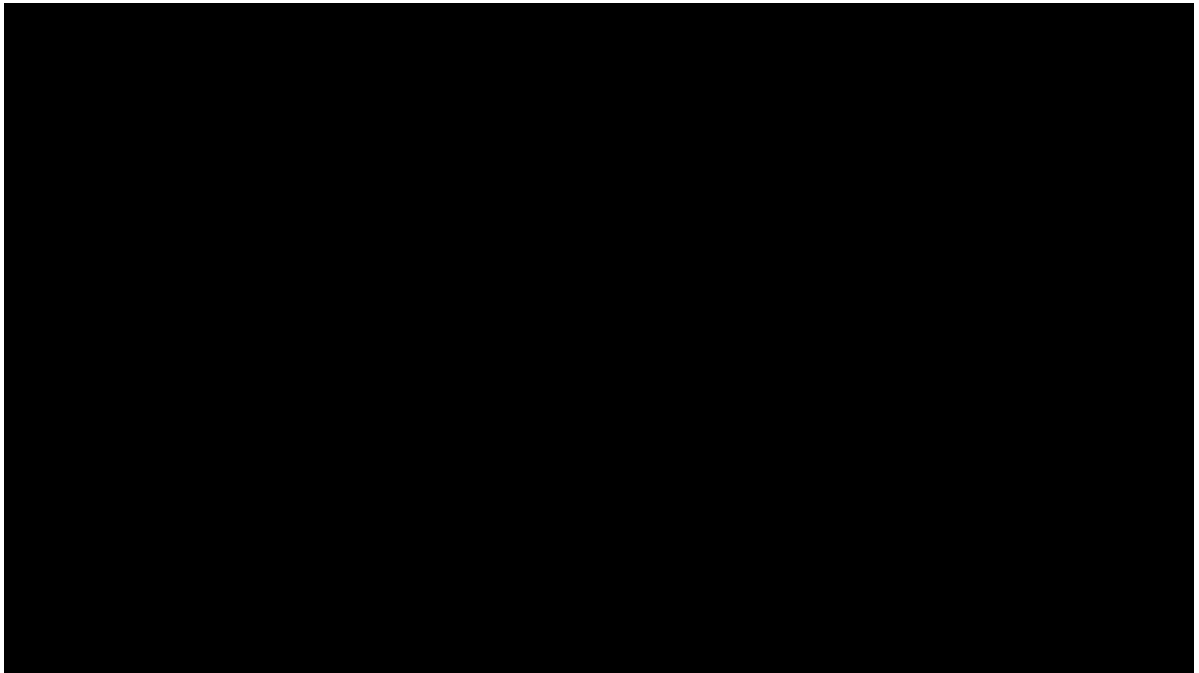
It is not our first. It won't be our last. History is bound to repeat itself. Have we learned anything from the cycles that preceded us? *We*—within all its plural form—is meant to be universal yet specific to the complex struggles of a utopian world. We are a provocation for possible and imagined futures that stray away from Stephen Duncombe's "tyranny of the possible."<sup>2</sup> We look for alternative collective futures that go beyond the constraints of the past into a current moment of multiple possibilities of the human experience. The following essay explores the embodiment of the hum<sup>3</sup> as an affective source of connection<sup>4</sup> between pandemics—past and current. Although, I acknowledge that the phenomenology and the epistemology of the hum remain largely structured around whiteness and its temporalities, here I use the hum as that which holds new modalities of perception, encounter, and engagement with and for Black diasporas and their temporalities, including Black feminist futurities.<sup>5</sup> The hum in this paper, simultaneously holds the potentialities to

differ and also find a place of connection through emotion, through affective registers experienced in vibrations (section 2), through silence(s) (section 3), and as visualsonic and sensory registers (section 4). The hum in *Radio Influenza*<sup>6</sup> serves as a collective resonance for solidarities and empathy.

We find ourselves over one hundred years after the 1918 influenza pandemic. At that time, clear communication was key. According to John M. Barry in *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*,<sup>7</sup> federal governments were transparent about the public health agenda, especially after public health messages in the United Kingdom were confusing with smoking and gatherings restrictions relaxed, and leaflet campaigns warned about the spreading disease through sneezes and coughs; in the United States quarantines on citizens, the mandatory wearing of face masks, and the closing of entertainment venues across the country translated into a lower death rate. The fifty million deaths of 1918 could remind us today that our advancements in disease prevention and control do not make us infallible. We find more similarities to the practices in 1918 than we would want. Doctors and nurses are recruited due to a shortage of medical personnel. There is a lack of mechanical ventilators; laboratory tests to recognize the virus are scarce in poorer countries just as vaccine distribution and availability, while the surplus of pharmaceutical interventions in wealthier countries also overflow with vaccine waste, as thousands of spoiled or expired unused doses are tossed every day.<sup>8</sup> Then and now, we have resorted to quarantine, isolation, and limits to public gatherings.

Our world population has grown from 1.8 billion people to 7.6 billion people in one hundred years; however, we neglect to remember our mistakes. Having local officials not be transparent with their constituents about the severity of the pandemic results in deaths, in cost of credibility, public fear, and panic. We neglect to abide by the unified messages based on evidence about what we know and what we do not know. We are neglectful during public health crises. The quick spread of the virus, the limited ways of prevention, the limited sources of treatment all respond to the challenges of surveillance capacity, fragile infrastructure, and oversight in pandemic planning. We neglect our history, where epidemics have turned into pandemics due to an increase of hosts, a global movement, mobility, and expansion of human populations, from rural to urban, to massive outbreaks.

## Cycles of Quotidien Pandemic Instances- Voice(les...



## Section 2: "Wake: . . . a region of disturbed flow"<sup>9</sup>

We keep on moving because we believe that movement is the only way forward. However, can we consider the possibility of us having idealized movement? With such movement, we have materialized the essence that proves global access, just as the blueprints of the slave ships materialize the Atlantic Slave Trade. If we stand still, we can also find movement embedded in the disruptive/disrupted sonic-mediascape that represents other registers of the double consciousness, that which W. E. B. DuBois coined the "core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antinomy of diaspora blacks,"<sup>10</sup> These diasporas create flows where traces of breath emanate from the evaporated voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade. This disruptive process of double consciousness can also be understood as the possibility for the "other" to speak and exist. Movement unveils other dimensions of our environment, particularly those we do not render as material.

We see the unthinkable<sup>11</sup> through things that haunt us since the unthinkable connects to those silences that become present and that appear before us. Their buried inscription is now bolded, highlighted, and magnified. These voices can be noises of quietness and meaningfulness<sup>12</sup> or signals representing something other than disappearance or erasure.

In these vibrating<sup>13</sup> noises, we find disruptive patterns of obfuscation<sup>14</sup> that encounter and visualize the asymmetries of power. However, we discover different dimensions to the material, which arises through the unspeakable, the unknowable, and the unthinkable. These dimensions are silences and disruption in silences, where evidence is not necessarily corporeal and where memories are multi-mediated.

Silencing the knowledge of our past will not make that knowledge disappear; it transforms into a hum, which evokes an emotion made visible by an object surrounding the listener. A hum evokes through its vibrations; "it can be mournful; it can be presence in absence or can take the form of a gritty moan in the foreground or a soothing massage in the background. It can celebrate, animate, or accompany. It can also irritate, haunt, grate, or distract."<sup>15</sup> I ask myself about what makes the hum audible. It could be the embodiment of desire or hopefulness, or perhaps the humming of utopian dreams and aspirations. Hums evoke differently in different circumstances, whether we listen to them, to its reverb and vibrato<sup>16</sup> with our eyes closed or open. The individualized attention to the hum becomes our echo chamber where static hums converse with ethereal ones, intertwined by air and breath, which make the hum possible. These connections and conditions are brought by the consciousness of the hum—and its willful erasure. The hum can be latent or immediate, as a part of the background or foregrounding noise in different settings; the hum can be music, a voice, or even brought to life by inanimate objects. One way or another, the hum vibrates and makes us vibrate alongside it. Its movement makes us wary of its liveliness, even if overheard—but can hardly be overlooked. In the end, the hum becomes relevant to those that feel it; the environment guides its significance through sonic signals and their embedded sound marks. I could visualize the hum as a void, where emptiness is deafening, and the hum is a resonating silence. However, even if the hum were a form of isolation between the individual and the outer world, its connection to objects makes it a companion to our emotional lives, provoked by thought and senses, like the visual and the sonic. Like any other unexpected encounter, the hum brings us back to objects and reinforces their power in our everyday lives. As Sherry Turkle invites the reader of *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* to follow an object's association to understand its active presence in our lives,<sup>17</sup> I trace the hum in these same objects that capture the vibrations of our emotion, those that become our affective trail in decibels, in tone, in dissonance, and in synchrony.

The hum, as a fluid object of silence can be mournful, representing absence. The hum that we are neglecting connects with our feelings, registering as cyclic vibrations in contact with parts of the body. The vibrato of the hum speaks of unspoken relations that, according to Tina Campt,<sup>18</sup> unifies quietness with sound, surrounded by affect within a register of meaningfulness. If we don't dare to remember, some images will enunciate—and speak to—the affective register. With the sonic integration of *Radio Influenza*, artist Jordan Baseman's computerized voices narrate stories from 1918 through newspaper fragments. The audible tracks add another register to the vibrations, complicating Paul Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration,"<sup>19</sup> where the "lower frequency" is purposefully over(p)laid mainly with a different set of forgotten histories suppressed from the war narrative. Hence, the sound is felt from an audible and visual register, enacted at the level of the quotidian narratives of twentieth-century photographs and newspaper stories. If we listen to these quiet photos, to these muffled stories, can we acknowledge that just as

sonic vibrations, pandemics tend to come in waves as well? In the end, the 1918 Spring influenza outbreak was followed by three waves: the fall of 1918, spring of 1919, and winter of 1919. These waves of history, sound, and pandemics, can push us to resist neglectfulness and acknowledge what we have unlearned from cycles of quotidian instances of happenings, time and time again. Accepting cycles can be haunting, perhaps especially when considering the accompaniment made up of affect and tensions, of hums and sounds. The process of materializing sound can be confusing but without this work, it may remain in the unthinkable realm, an unreachable influence that does not affect the listener in any possible way. While denial might be a way to avoid confrontation, it is also a form of refusal, one that comes with an inability to forget. Whatever is denied then becomes another haunted place of memory, created by a collective to establish affect, to materialize absences—present or not—as well as fears and desires that have become a part of our sonic cultural register.

## Section 3: Silence as the Absence

The pandemic stories are narrated through objects—mainly through masks—bringing frequencies forward using histories and personal narratives. These intersecting objects go beyond the embodiment of an audio-spatial territory for performance;<sup>20</sup> through hums, they convey individual and collective meanings about the object and what can be said through it. In *Happy Objects*, Sara Ahmed theorizes affect and its decisive implications towards happiness through objects.<sup>21</sup> Happiness, Ahmed details, is conceived through the *hap-*, a moment of choice that precedes, through things, the contingent affects. By applying Ahmed's conversion points of affect, where the frequencies are deviated as they transition through spaces, objects, and collective engagement, memories and feelings shape emotions embodied through the objects. The pandemic's testimonies of pain disrupt the idea of forgetting, challenging, and contesting the pain of others.<sup>22</sup> By working through affect, objects surface through a deceptive "cruel optimism,"<sup>23</sup> a deviation of affect between bodies, which encounters disappointment within the archival system.

Even when materializing the 1918 stories by using computerized voices, there is no actual presence of that sound, only animated objects that perform and fluidly evolve from and through the memories they embody, that speak through the stories that created the animated objects. While some of the archival materials portray violence and death, history hums through sensorial archived sound, evoking different affective relationships from the listener to the register that the revitalized sound waves invite. The recollection embodies what Simone Browne names the "absented presence"<sup>24</sup> by transitioning from objects to memory, image, and sound. The absence comes to show in the disembodiment of governing memories—after being surveilled, intervened with, curated, and archived—transforming into transitional objects that trace abandoned narratives, according to Turkle.<sup>25</sup> The history of the 1918 influenza resonates as an uncanny reminder of survival, testimonials that hum the story of those who masked and socially distanced while facing the uncertain thoughts and feelings conveyed upon them.

We listen closely to the affective relationships we have with these objects as individuals and spectators. The recognized need for countervailing the damages of historical erasure comes from pasts made invisible in historicizing, in part through undervaluing the modality of quietness. Sound is a sensory register that overall lacks prioritization, needing to create its possibilities within the constraints of everyday life. By pushing our predisposition of the personal understanding of the material archive, the audible contests quietness through power and knowledge, embellishing the engagement through mystifying the past via erasures and silences. However, I find in silences a particular element of space and reflection. Reading the silence is finding those moments of ruptures, the inaudible and illegible mode of black noise<sup>26</sup> that reverberate in the quotidian. Breaks enable affective registers, or what Angela Carter calls attributes of instability, as spatio-temporal disruptions bring about social change and collective healing.<sup>27</sup> Without silence, there is no tempo; there is no signal; there is no hum. It becomes affective, for it resonates with the affective life of the modern subject. Silence is a tactile form of evoking memory rather than the erasure of history. Sound recognizes a need for history, for the *becoming* memory of the present to incorporate in the affective lives of the narrated history. Because there is an archive of absence, we can imply that hums, sounds, and silences have been forgotten. Even so, the modality of quietness leads to new ways of feeling sound, where the interpretation foregoes the objects, evidencing the subject's emotion.

## Section 4: The Visualsonic Resistance. . . of Non/Being<sup>28</sup>

Hence, listening to the stories beyond the images becomes complicated, especially when the focus is on sight instead of listening. When looking at the photos, the sonic frequencies of their hums<sup>29</sup> embody the surroundings and the self, where eyes become another channel for the echo chamber-mixing room, and signals clash. However, the different texture of the elements in the photographs builds up their humming potential in material streams that produce changes in the listener's body, consciousness, and way of thinking about the images in themselves. As listeners, we tip-toe around the emotions brought on by vibrations we encounter, where the hums are sorrowed, with vital breaths and static—a sigh. Silence ceases to be associated with serenity but with fear, which succumbs to our listening practice through the breaks, where the objects vibrate on the inside. The frequencies haptically translate into a harmonious way of communicating. The emotions linger through these several sensory registers going back and forth in cycles of vibration. These orchestrated stories resemble people's lives and the traces they left behind. However, the improvisational nature of affect and emotion-making in movement creates a transtemporal cultural memory. Even as we acknowledge that each story is different, I believe that a significant challenge is bringing them into conversation with each other. This connection embraces the storytellers' subjectivities and recognizes a lack of objectivity when it all comes down to the choice in happening.


The humming of the objects that make up these narratives trace a sonic map of memories. Aural politics<sup>30</sup> and intersubjectivities connect the different moments of movement that





















bind and unbind moments of intimacy with the subjects and between objects; their hums help us remember. Suppose we understand remembering as a desire to invoke memory and project forward by looking back. In that case, we could imply that the objects take on a role of bodies as archives of memory. Those objects that map the traces mix together the power narratives as a memory-mapping experience. The sonic history—and historicity—can mix through rhizomatic objects. With a non-linear and disorienting experience, sonic history is rooted—first and foremost—in the understanding of power. The hums and noise—either heard or dismissed—rely much more on the listener than on the object itself. The possibility of speech offered by hums and noise channels the abyss as a basis for evoking emotion through a visually-inflected politics of sound material culture.

According to Aristotle, reappropriation happens as the sound occurs when bodies collide in the air,<sup>31</sup> with their capabilities and disabilities. As a vibrating object sets motion and disruption of a medium, I understand this collision as a mixing-in-motion of collective memory through different moments, places, and objects. Within this wavelength emotion is at the forefront a possibility for commemoration of the past, by listening to the present, to archive for the future, as that future is *happening*. This mix preserves and includes memories as sonic annotations on the margins of databases and memorials to incorporate a hum that pervades collective memories in the memory archive and future memories. In the end, the voice(less) narratives as an apparatus-of-othering enable the openness of memory to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. In oscillation, this haunting sense of ethereal mourning is remixed and differently represented as a material recollection—and historicization—of the past.






## Notes

1. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), x. [↗](#)
2. Stephen Duncombe and Sarah Peters, "Utopia is No Place," *Walker Reader*, August 27, 2012, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/stephen-duncombe-utopia-open-field> < <https://walkerart.org/magazine/stephen-duncombe-utopia-open-field>> . [↗](#)
3. While Lawrence Kramer calls the hum the material promise of sound within the threshold of the auditory sensation, I understand the hum as an individualized affective and emotional register, gone collective. See Lawrence Kramer, *The Hum of the World: A Philosophy of Listening*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018, 4. There is humming everywhere around us, but what does the hum mean other than taking on different bodies; it can be disturbingly loud or hauntingly silent. Regardless of the depth of the hum, it is important to acknowledge that it is there. Even if the hum does not have in itself a purpose, I would say it is more about its relationship to the listener than the core intentionality of the hum. [↗](#)
4. Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5> < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>> . [↗](#)
5. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017). [↗](#)
6. *Radio Influenza* is a sonic artwork of computerized recordings of fragments of newspaper stories from 1918. The uncanny familiarity of American artist Jordan Baseman's project makes the

dystopian possible through the artifice of voices and sound. See <https://radioinfluenza.org/about> < <https://radioinfluenza.org/about/>> . 

7. John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking Press, 2004). 
8. Will Stone, "Alabama Just Tossed 65,000 Vaccines. Turns Out It's Not Easy To Donate Unused Doses," *Goats and Soda* (series), NPR, August 10, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/08/10/1025463260/alabama-just-tossed-65-000-vaccines-turns-out-its-not-easy-to-donate-unused-dose> < <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/08/10/1025463260/alabama-just-tossed-65-000-vaccines-turns-out-its-not-easy-to-donate-unused-dose>> . 
9. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 3. 
10. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 30. 
11. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2015). 
12. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). 
13. A particular sense of vibration which moves with and through the material, without it being considered material in itself. 
14. Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015). 
15. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 4. 
16. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 45. 
17. Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2007). 
18. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 4. 
19. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37. 
20. Jane Birkin, "Art, Work, and Archives: Performativity and the Techniques of Production," *Archive Journal* 5 (Fall 2015), <https://www.archivejournal.net/essays/art-work-and-archives> < <https://www.archivejournal.net/essays/art-work-and-archives/>> . 
21. Sarah Ahmed, "Happy Objects" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010): 29–51. 
22. Based on the notion brought forward by Susan Sontag regarding the pain of others. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). 
23. Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses," *New Formations* 2007, no. 63 (Winter 2007). 
24. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 13. 
25. Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 314. 
26. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2005.92.1.1> . 



27. Angela M. Carter, "When Silence Said Everything: Reconceptualizing Trauma through Critical Disability Studies," *Lateral* 10.1 (Spring 2021), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.8> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.8>> . 
28. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21. 
29. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 8. 
30. Josh Kun, "The Aural Border," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25068738> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25068738>> . 
31. Aristotle. *De Anima, Books II and III*, trans. David W. Hamlyn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968). 
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## Author Information



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Paulina is a PhD candidate at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. She identifies material culture as a source of memory and nostalgia through the lens of archival and cultural studies. By examining materiality as an archival mechanism for storytelling through spatial-temporal remembrance, the visual and audible aesthetics become stimuli for developing interactions across disciplines. Paulina is a member of the Civic Paths group and involved in research in the Skid Row and Homeless Connectivity Project, and the Mobile Devices Global Mapping Project. She is a founding member and organizer of Critical Mediations, a communication and cultural studies conference.

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